



families

According to the town of Black Jack, Missouri, Fondray Loving, Olivia Shelltrack, and their three children are not a family. The couple has lived together for 13 years and are raising their own two children as well as at-home-mom Olivia's daughter from a previous relationship. They eat meals together, display vacation photos on their refrigerator, and attend PTA meetings. However, when they went to city hall to secure a certificate of occupancy for the house they purchased in this St. Louis suburb, they learned that their new town prohibits more than three people from sharing a residence if they are not related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Because Shelltrack and Loving have chosen not to marry, they do not qualify as a family under their local housing laws.

Most people can identify the members of their family, but what defines "the family" depends on who is doing the defining. From policymakers who regard families as units for administrative purposes like distributing health care and determining ownership of property, to cultural critics who bemoan or celebrate what they view as the decline of the nuclear family, to entertainment executives who capitalize on our seemingly limitless fascination with diverse domestic relationships, the question of what counts as a family today is hotly contested across a range of political issues. Though many of these issues appear to have ancient pedigrees, it turns out that "the family" is a fairly recent historical innovation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the entry of the word family into the English language as late as the 15th century, when it was used to denote the servants of a household. It has since been used to designate a wide range of collectives: the retinue of a nobleman, the staff of a high-ranking military officer or state official, groups of individuals or nations bound together by religious or political ties, even members of local units of the Mafia. Only during the Victorian era did our present common meaning of family—an intimate set of people related by blood, law, and sentiment, and particularly a married woman and man and their children—come to dominate. Ask the average person, and you might also hear that families are sites of love and care, or sometimes of violence, abuse, and deprivation. Feminist anthropologists Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako make a

point of identifying the family as an ideology rather than an institution, one that prescribes norms for domestic arrangements that change over time, but more slowly than the economic and social conditions that undergird them.

As the word family has evolved in its usage, so too have domestic arrangements shifted in the course of the long historical transformations often referred to as "modernization." The "modern family" in the West, comprising a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and their children, evolved from a patriarchal, premodern economy in which work and family life were thoroughly integrated. In the United States during the 19th century, industrialization turned most men into breadwinners outside the home and women into homemakers by separating paid employment from domestic work. Originating within the white middle class, this family structure came to represent modernity and normality. Yet it was not until the mid-20th century that a significant percentage of male workers could earn enough to sustain such a family, and it has always exceeded the reach of most African Americans and new immigrants. Slaves were not allowed to marry and had no parental rights. Since Emancipation, many African-American and new immigrant mothers have tended the modern family homes and children of relatively privileged whites instead of being able to tend to their own. As working-class families seldom have been able to support full-time homemakers, the 1950s model of domesticity has remained a ubiquitous social ideal, but rarely more than a white, middle-class reality.

Rigidly defined economic roles for men and women developed along with new gender ideologies to sustain them. The 19th century brought increasingly romanticized ideals of a voluntary "companionate marriage" as well as the "cult of true womanhood"—a celebration of female domesticity and maternalism—that continue to permeate Western gender and family ideology. Analogous legal doctrines stressed the importance of maternal nurturance during the "tender years" of childhood. Feminist sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti suggests that women's economic dependence on men, prescribed by a supposed complementary and natural division of labor, was but a new version of the premodern, "patriarchal bargain," in which women accept overt subordination in exchange for male protection and

secure social status. Other scholars stress how the new, female-only domestic sphere formed the backdrop to women's solidarity and the beginnings of grassroots feminist organizing.

While high mortality rates kept premodern family patterns diverse and unpredictable, notable declines in mortality and fertility made modern family life more linear and homogenous. By the mid-20th century, a life-course journey from the cradle through courtship, marriage, procreation, parenting, and grandparenthood to the grave became so common that the family began to appear natural, universal, and self-evident. Social scientists tend to reflect the tacit cultural understandings of their era. Functionalist sociologists working in that period, notably Talcott Parsons and William Goode, tended to assume the naturalness or inevitability of the nuclear family form. During the post-World War II period, they developed a theory rooted in the conviction that U.S. family history would prove to be a global model. Arguing that the modern nuclear family was ideally suited to support an industrial economy, Goode predicted its spread throughout the modernizing world.

This "family modernization thesis" presumed the superiority of Western cultural forms, a presumption often shared by political authorities. In fact, so convinced have Western governments been of the superiority of our gender and family patterns that they have often imposed them on subjugated peoples. The United States, for example, disrupted matrilineal and extended kin systems among several New World cultures by awarding land titles exclusively to male-headed, nuclear household units. Similarly, after the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau vigorously promoted monogamous marriage and the morality of the nuclear family among former slaves. Because slaves frequently were sold to other plantations, many entered several *de facto* marriages without any rituals terminating their previous unions. Others engaged in serial cohabitations, multiple sexual partnerships, and plural marriages. Legal scholar Katherine Franke and historian Deborah Gray White maintain that the right to civil marriage carried great symbolic value for emancipated slaves, but within the larger Reconstruction project of "civilizing" them, marriage also provided an opportunity to impose European norms of morality on African Americans.

In numerous other instances, legal disruption of the family and kinship relationships practiced by cultural minorities and indigenous peoples has been justified in the name of its civilizing effects. For example, polygamy (the marriage of

men to multiple wives) is a common practice in pre-industrial societies throughout the world, frequently for economic and procreative ends. Although polygamy is a patriarchal kinship form, some women have favored it for the companionship and shared workload it can provide. Women in Botswana, for example, revise our familiar aphorism, "A woman's work is never done," to claim that "Without co-wives, a woman's work is never done."

Polygamy was also widely practiced among Mormons in the Utah territories after Joseph Smith's Celestial Revelation in 1843. Smith's followers, women as well as men, considered what they called "patriarchal marriage" to be a biblical prerequisite to higher levels of salvation. In horrified response, the Republican Party platform of 1856 paired polygamy with slavery and pledged itself to eliminate these "twin relics of barbarism." Over the next several decades, the U.S. government employed increasingly coercive tactics against Mormon plural marriage, from curtailing the property or voting rights of polygamists (a precursor to the contemporary plight of the Loving-Shelltrack family), to direct legislation against bigamy and refusing Utah's application to the union until the Latter Day Saints church finally capitulated and renounced the practice in 1890.

Diverse critical traditions in sociology have been less enamored than mid-20th-century modernization theorists with the ruling ideas, policies, and practices of the industrializing and globalizing West. Most critical sociologists regard family patterns and relationships as products of their social and historical contexts, no more inevitable than any other feature of social life. Marxists since Friedrich Engels have stressed how struggles between capitalists and workers have shaped and challenged modern family forms, including the very concepts of privacy and intimacy. Inspired by the spirit of second-wave feminism, scholars such as Heidi Hartmann, Nancy Chodorow, and Arlie Hochschild have analyzed how male domination and privilege work within the changing (and unchanging) gender division of family, emotions, and labor; how women comply with the coercive features of male-dominated families; and the moments of resistance in which they refuse to do so. Work by feminist sociologists of color, including Bonnie Thornton Dill, Patricia Hill Collins, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, in turn, has challenged the unwitting ways in which these feminist scholars validated the white, middle-class, nuclear family form even as they criticized it.

European postindustrial theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck have explored the implications of the dramatic "transformation of intimacy" that became evident late in the 20th century. Family scholars continue to debate who gained and who lost ground when sexuality was freed from reproduction, and

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the romantic 19th-century ideals of voluntary companionate marriage gave way to a more individualized, and destabilizing, pursuit of what Giddens termed the “pure relationship.” Clearly prominent among the beneficiaries and innovations are new forms of intimacy and kinship among self-identified lesbians, gays, and queers. Upending the long-held presumption of most family scholars and citizens that family life is inevitably a heterosexual product, gays and lesbians began composing what queer scholars Kath Weston and Jeffrey Weeks call “families of choice.”

The new millennium provides family scholars, regardless of their intellectual orientation, with resounding evidence that family diversity is ubiquitous and family change unceasing. Postindustrial labor conditions and the spread of a global marketplace underwrite continually shifting occupational and personal opportunities and crises. Women now participate fully in an increasingly unstable and competitive worldwide labor force, with profound implications for gender identity, procreation, and parenting. Throughout advanced industrial societies, rising numbers of men and women alike are deferring or foregoing marriage and parenthood. When they do marry, their divorce rates are high and remarriages are frequent, rendering family constellations increasingly complex. Single individuals now reside alone in a full quarter of U.S. households, while far fewer families conform to the 1950s ideal of a married male breadwinner, at-home mom, and their children. Most of us know single parents, step-families, cohabiting couples (many of whom have children), interracial families, and children adopted from abroad. More and more of us know parents who have used assisted reproductive technologies, including gay and lesbian couples and individuals. Despite such changes in the family, however, tenacious patterns of historical disadvantage and discrimination continue to maintain sharp racial and class disparities in family forms and fortunes.

Anyone who reads a newspaper or watches television knows that these changes provoke considerable fear and anxiety. This “postmodern family condition” has fueled culture wars over “family values” and political contests over issues such as no-fault divorce, abortion, welfare, “fatherlessness,” sex education, faith-based marriage-promotion initiatives, same-sex marriage, and lesbian and gay adoption and custody rights. Family sociology itself plays a part in these conflicts as politicians and advocates frequently use research on the causes and effects of divorce, single parenthood, sex education, gay parenting, and the like to buttress their claims. At the core of these controversies lies a funda-

mental ideological divide over whether it is better to promote a “one size fits all” model for American family life or to give broader acceptance and support to family diversity.

Should the Loving-Shelltrack household count as a family entitled to occupy their new home in Missouri or not? Whatever our personal and political viewpoints may be on the risks, opportunities, and social legitimacy of contemporary family patterns, one prediction seems certain. In the foreseeable future, family sociologists face no threat of running out of new research material.

recommended resources

Nancy F. Cott. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2000). This engaging political history of marriage in the United States as a pivotal public institution demonstrates how the state has used it to impose Christian standards of morality on diverse communities of Native Americans, slaves, and new immigrants.

Anthony Giddens. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford University Press, 1993). This is an optimistic, interpretive essay on the development of the individual pursuit of love and sexuality for their own sake as an intrinsic part of the transition to late modernity in the West.

William J. Goode. *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (The Free Press, 1963). This classic example of the “family modernization thesis” remains one of the most cited works in family sociology. Goode studies post–World War II changes in gender and family patterns in five major regions of the world.

Judith Stacey. *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late 20th Century America*. 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 1998). This ethnographic study of the impact of postindustrial society, feminism, and fundamentalism on working-class families in the Silicon Valley depicts the emergence of the postmodern family condition of diversity, fluidity, and political conflict.

Kath Weston. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Columbia University Press, 1991). This path-breaking urban ethnography examines how lesbians and gay men in San Francisco actively draw upon ties rooted in friendship and love, as well as biology, to construct their own forms of family and kinship.